Document#4 "Grievances of the Merchant Flower Sellers" (1789), Women in Revolutionary Paris (1979), pp. 22-26.

2. The Specific Grievances of the Merchant Flower Sellers of the City and Faubourgs of Paris

Source: *Doléances particulières des marchandes bouquetières fleuristes chapelières en fleurs de la Ville et faubourgs de Paris* [1789], in Charles-Louis Chassin, *Les Elections et les cahiers de Paris en 1789*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1888–89), vol. II, pp. 534–37.

In this cahier, written to express grievances of women who made their living in Paris as flower sellers, the petitioners revere the King, and at the same time they expect the Estates General, and particularly the Third Estate's representatives, to function as their national spokesmen, but they also argue that rights consecrated under law and by tradition are valid, whatever the disposition of King and Estates might be. These women sent their cahier to the electors of the Third Estate at the Archevêché, to city officials, to Necker, and, finally, to the Estates General.

The liberty accorded to all citizens to expose before the nation's representatives the abuses which assail them from all sides is without doubt a sure sign of impending reform.

In this confidence, the *marchandes bouquetières* formerly comprising the *communauté des maîtresses bouquetières et marchandes chapelières en fleurs* of the City and Faubourgs of Paris venture to address themselves to you, our Lords (the Estates General). It is not for ordinary abuses they ask correction. It is their trade, their whole existence, which they lost by the doubtless involuntary error of one of His Majesty's former ministers, which they reclaim at this time.

Even before forming a *communauté* and constituting themselves as a *corps de jurande,* the *marchandes bouquetières* already had statutes which they enforced among themselves under the authority and jurisdiction of the *prévôt* of Paris or of his lieutenant-general of police.

This kind of *jurande,* as imperfect as it was, undoubtedly prevented

abuses. However, it was soon realized that these precautions would not be adequate for maintaining order unless the responsibility for internal discipline was placed in the hands of the *bouquetières*. Consequently, they were established as a *communauté*.

In 1735, thanks to the kindheartedness of Louis XV, the *maîtresses bouquetières* obtained verification of their *communauté* and new regulations which were ordered executed by *lettres-patentes* of November 26, 1736, [and] registered in Parlement on December 18, 1737.

The *maîtresses bouquetières* who had undergone a three-year apprenticeship and who had paid substantial fees for the *maîtrise* were peacefully plying their trade when they found themselves suddenly deprived of it by the suppression of their *communauté*.

The ministers' oppressive silence, the menaces with which they were armed—doubtless without their knowledge—and the repellent coldness of their clerks stifled their [the *bouquetières'*] cries at that time, but today, when a better order is in the making, they hope for everything from the Prince's justice and from that of the Estates.

In the eyes of anyone else except the enlightened representatives of the nation, the petitioners' reclamation perhaps would not seem worth the sacrifice of some of the precious time being allocated to the examination of the major interests which will occupy them. But they [the *bouquetières*] need not fear being rebuffed. They know, these worthy representatives of the French people, that they have a greater responsibility towards the most indigent class in particular. The more unfortunate a man is, the more sacred are his rights, especially where his trade constitutes all the wealth he has. Its protection cannot fail to be of concern to the nation's deputies and to hold their attention.

Besides, the petitioners' reclamation is bound up with an important issue which is submitted to the Estates for a decision: that of knowing whether it would be useful or not to allow every individual an indeterminate liberty to engage in all kinds of commerce.

Let the petitioners be allowed to venture some reflections here which may perhaps pave the way for a decision on this capital issue.

In the regulation of commerce and trade, two things should be taken into consideration. The entire *corps* should be organized so that each individual who commits himself to a trade can earn a living for himself and his children. However, access to trades, and above all to those which are designated in particular for the class with meager means, should not be made so difficult that the industry of the poor is discouraged and emulation stifled.

This combination, on which the general happiness and the prosperity

of commerce rest, necessarily would be destroyed by indeterminate liberty.

Too great a facility allowed under the edicts of 1776 and 1777 has made all the professions only too acutely aware of the inconveniences of this liberty. A large number of merchants does not produce—far from it—the salutary effect which it would appear must have been expected from competition. Because the number of consumers does not increase in proportion to the number of artisans, the latter necessarily hurt one another; they can obtain the buyer's preference only by lowering the price of their goods. Distress and the need to sell at a low price force them to turn out shoddy [goods] or to feign ruin, which brings mortal blows to commerce.

The more restricted a trade is, [and] the fewer resources it holds out, the more important it is to reduce the number of competitors. Unfortunately, since the suppression of their *communauté,* that is what the petitioners have found out. Their trade, although limited, offered them, before this suppression, a means for making a living and raising their children. Today, when everybody can sell flowers and arrange bouquets, their modest gains are divided up to the point that they can no longer make enough to live on. The lure of this gain, restricted though it may be, and even more, a strong propensity for laziness, nonetheless determined a crowd of young people of the feminine sex to enter the petitioners' trade; and because their trade cannot feed them, they look to libertinage and the most shameful debauchery for the means they are lacking. The petitioners' cause is also that of morals.

The flower trade in itself does not suffer any the less from this anarchy. There is no more policing of the market. All the unprincipled girls whom no law, no decency can restrain, throw themselves on the goods which the flower growers bring, pillage them or crush them, [and] arbitrarily set the price. And only too often it happens that because of this, the flower growers lose the precious fruit of their hard work. It's because of this [situation] that brawls arise during which these hawkers are backed up by soldiers and by disreputable characters. It is because of this that you get this abuse which set in when liberty was accorded in the trade of the *marchandes bouquetières:* girls who are not merchants have thought up the idea of fastening orange blossoms with pins or artificial flowers which they attach to the aforementioned branches [or] they attach several carnations together and put them on cards and sell them as a single one.

All these abuses, which can only be ended with the reestablishment of the *communauté,* are contrary to order and discouraging for the growers,

who devote themselves to the cultivation of flowers. The inconveniences produced by these disorders have been felt in all times, and it is because of them that in 1731 the new statutes for the *communauté des bouquetières maîtresses* were confirmed.

Therefore, the petitioners dare expect from the equity of the Estates the reestablishment of their corporation. Besides, this is a justice that is due them since they paid the King considerable sums for enjoying the advantages of their trade, advantages they are deprived of by too much competition and the disorders it brings with it.

The petitioners ask that a police force be provided to stop large numbers of people who, claiming free trade, hang around the market every night (and especially the nights before holidays for patron saints), waiting for the flower growers and intending to abuse their good faith. They lay waste to the markets, either arbitrarily or by leave of the authorities, before the usual hour for selling the above-mentioned flowers. These same people have strayed from honesty to the point of going off into the countryside, where they lay waste to the flower beds and orange groves belonging to seigneurs and private homes.

The former *journalières bouquetières* are reduced to the most extreme poverty by the different kinds of people who have taken to selling flowers. Since liberty was declared in this branch of trade, the petitioners have been pained to see mothers of families without work, [women] whom they used to support with wages of thirty *sols* a day, plus food; four *livres,* ten *sols* for two and one-half days' work during the minor holidays; and nine *livres,* also for two and one-half days, during the principal holidays—which allowed them to raise their little families.

Liberty, which all orders of the State reclaim, cannot constitute an obstacle to the petitioners' request. Liberty is an enemy of license, and citizens are free so long as they obey only the laws which they impose upon themselves.

The petitioners entrust their just reclamation to the deputies of the Third Estate above all. They [the deputies of the Third Estate] more than the others [that is, more than the deputies of the First and Second Estates] are their [the petitioners'] representatives, their friends, their brothers, and it is up to them to plead the cause of indigent people.

Based on these considerations, let an irrevocable order be promulgated, with interdictions, from His Majesty to the effect that under no pretext whatsoever shall a *marchande bouquetière* or other person be permitted to buy or sell flowers before 6 A.M. between [the religious holidays of] Pâques and Saint-Martin, and also before 6 A.M. between Saint-Martin and Pâques.

The petitioners will not cease addressing vows to the heavens for the protection and prosperity of the nation's representatives.

Signed: the above-mentioned *marchandes,* represented by Madame Marlé, syndic of the corporation

WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY PARIS 1789–1795

Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary by

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